SMALL REGIONS, BIG STRUCTURES, LARGE PROCESSES: LABOR UNREST IN EARLY-TWENTIEH-CENTURY PUERTO RICO IN WORLD-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Kelvin Santiago-Valles

Binghamton University-SUNY

This paper looks at local and global effects of the strikes (in the sugar-cane and tobacco products sectors, as well as in the dockyards) and the cost-of-living protests in the U.S. colony of Puerto Rico between the two world wars. On the one hand, I assess these social struggles—and their wider regional and Atlantic context—by looking at how all this impacted the structures of domination in Puerto Rico and how the elites ("native" *criollos* and North American colonizers) responded to such social discontent and its protagonists. This labor militancy in Puerto Rico is positioned as part of broader social conflicts unfolding in the rest of the Caribbean Basin and worldwide during this same period. On the other hand, I examine the extent to which these regional protests impacted—and interacted with—both the looming protracted crisis of the capitalist world economy and the shifts in global hegemony among the leading world powers at this time.

From the early years of North American rule in Puerto Rico following the Spanish-American War of 1898, sugar corporations in this island were linked to U.S. banking, commercial, utility, and manufacturing monopoly-capital interests established on the island. The tripling of sugar crop-land between 1899 and 1919 confirmed the rapid transformation of Puerto Rico's entire local economy when sugar dominated exports by 1901 and did so into the 1940s (Clark 1930, 606-607, 646; Perloff 1950, 71, 136-137, 406). Although agriculture continued to incorporate most of the island's workers, sugar cultivation in particular rapidly became the economic sector employing the largest portion of that labor force (Perloff 1950, 401).

With the coming of the First World War there was a hegemonic breakdown within the capitalist-colonial world order as the United States and Germany (and their respective allies) vied each other over who was going to occupy the vacuum left by the final collapse

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of British global hegemony. That shift overlapped with the broad stratagems implemented by global capital to address the 1914-1919 recession and the 1920-1945 long wave of decline within the world-economy, including massive lay-offs, work speed-ups, sharp drops in income levels, and rural expulsions (Arrighi 1994, 270-295). The anti-systemic resistance against such measures partly targeted the declining positivist-Social-Darwinist global regime in crisis, as well as some of the incipient Keynesian social-regulatory mechanisms and their systems of meaning (Santiago-Valles 2012, 182-185). The rise of factory Taylorism and Fordism among core workers vis-à-vis the expansion of a Amanufacturing backyard@ (where racially-depreciated peoples labored) were part of these dominant social-control methods, resulting in: growing formal-political participation and trade-union rights for core laboring populations versus an uneven continuation of social restrictions for Asubject peoples,@ as well as formal-direct political rule and repressive policing (Aglietta 1979, 79-85, 111-119; Abernathy 2000, 92-103, 278-299; Winant 2002, 83-129; Thomas 2012).

In Puerto Rico the worsening socioeconomic conditions accompanying the First World War devastated this island and led to mass waves of labor resistance, beginning with general strikes in the cane fields and dockyards primarily under the leadership of the then combative *Federación Libre de Trabajadores* (FLT) founded in 1899 and of the *Partido Socialista* (PS) established in 1915. In the 1915 sugarcane strike 18,000 laborers paralyzed 24 of the 39 most important plantations for three months, a labor mobilization the colonial governor described as “the most important in Porto Rico [sic] since the American occupation” (Yager 1915, 424). The following year 40,000 laborers followed suit for approximately six months, roughly equivalent to 10% of the entire active labor force, coinciding with strikes in the tobacco factories and dockyards (Yager 1915, 446; NDT 1916, 11-12). Even though the 1915-1916 strikes in the sugar plantations brought noticeable pay raises for those laborers (Clark 1930, 637), the 1915 strikers’ clashes with the colonial police were exceptionally bloody. Those protests were so violently repressed that a U.S. federal commission intervened to investigate the colonial police and the local court system, while the colonial labor bureau issued similar condemnations of police excesses (NDT 1916, 11). The strikes of 1916 were not as bloody as those of 1915, albeit that year’s labor bureau report verified that the constabulary’s paramilitary operations in

townships near the plantations generated much popular outcry (NDT 1916, 12-13, 16).

The 1917-1918 strike wave implicated approximately 45,000 laborers participating in 88 stoppages across the entire island, again mostly in the sugar sector, tobacco-manufacturing shops, the dockyards, and assorted agricultural workers. Although not as harshly contested as the strikes during the preceding two years, the 1917-1918 strikes also produced a number of violent conflicts. The 1917 strike in the dockyards of San Juan thrust strikers against strikebreakers and the police resulting in at least one death and several wounded. Once again, the colonial police assaulted the laboring-poor community adjacent the dockyards provoking another small-scale urban uprising: angry residents stoned the local constabulary and the ensuing melee was only quelled when the constabulary finally stormed the workers' district and captured it at gunpoint. Later that same year, sugarcane strikers in the southern quarter of Guayama—one of the top two sugar-producing municipalities—likewise confronted police leaving laborers dead and policemen wounded (Yager 1917, 552-553; Yager 1918, 632-633).

There were more than 100 strikes during 1919-1921 mobilizing 32,000 laborers, once again crippling many agriculturally-based enterprises, dockyards, and tobacco factories, as well as paralyzing the island's railroad system. Following the pattern of the previous five years, these protests included another riot during the San Juan dockyard strike of 1919 with several people reported wounded. Once more there were armed battles between demonstrators, strikebreakers, and the colonial police, as well as the strike tactic of setting the cane fields on fire (Reily 1922, 35). These labor struggles overlapped with the social violence and property crimes of the poverty-stricken multitudes at that time aggravated by the sharp drop in imported goods during the First World War (Yager 1919, 501). One 1919 local newspaper reported that "Beggars continued appealing ceaselessly to public charity in the streets of Ponce [the colony's second largest town]. A cloud of hungry people blankets the city…" (cited in Silvestrini 1980, 59).

Social unrest also unfolded then in other portions of the U.S. overseas empire, most fiercely with the rural-laborer guerrilla war of the *cacos* in Haïti (1915-1922) and of the Dominican *gavilleros* (1917-1921) against the U.S. military occupation of both sides of Hispaniola, insurgencies being savagely crushed by the U.S. Marines and air corps (Castor 1971; Calder 1984). While in neo-colonial Cuba and during January-February of 1919,

strikes broke out in La Habana (construction workers, carpenters, typographers, and textile workers), Matanzas (cigar workers and stevedores), Cárdenas (stevedores), Santa Clara (United Railway Company workers), Rancho Boyeros (ceramic workers), Oriente (miners), and Cienfuegos (bakers) (Primelles 1957, 86-90). Analogous labor conflicts erupted in the British Empire's Caribbean colonies where—similar to the U.S. colony of Puerto Rico—the war in Europe had also created subsistence shortages overseas. Those dire conditions resulted in walkouts in Trinidad in 1919 (Martin 1973), mass demonstrations for wage increases and a reduced workday in Guyana during 1916-1918 and violent strikes in Jamaica during 1917-1919 (involving longshoremen, coal heavers, sanitation workers, ice-factory workers, sugar plantation workers, and railway workers) (Bolland 2001, 191, 194-195). Riots and strikes (among coal carriers, cane cutters, and stevedores) likewise erupted in Antigua, St. Lucia, and St. Kitts in 1917 and 1918 against the soaring prices of imported basic consumption items. The March 1918 work stoppage in Antigua's sugarcane plantations was particularly militant with canefields set ablaze and where—also like in Puerto Rico and Jamaica—the colonial constabulary fanned out into the neighboring laboring-poor communities, firing into the crowd and killing two local civilians (ibid, 193-194).

U.S. corporations in Puerto Rico responded to the 1915-1921 labor conflicts by restructuring their sugar operations, thus reversing (to 1919 levels) the wage increases of that strike wave and the gains of the mid- to late-1920s strikes. The result was soaring unemployment, bouts of starvation, and substantial rural-to-urban migration (Clark 1930, 565; Diffie and Diffie 1931, 174-175, 182; Gayer, et al. 1938, 181-204). With the Great Depression, levels of mass hunger and undernourishment rose dramatically proportionate to the costlier basic consumption goods resulting from the colonial government's fiscal policies (Diffie and Diffie 1931, 174-175). Between 1930 and 1939 sugar production still employed close to half of this island's labor force but wages had fallen to 1900-1914 levels (Gayer, et al. 1938, 181-204; Perloff 1950, 80-95, 398-399). In 1936 a colonial government agency reported wages "so low that they hardly suffice to allow the rice and beans and codfish which is common among the workers," even as widespread diseases continued to "exact a high toll of human lives" (cited in Gautier Mayoral 1980, 26). Conservative estimates report that by the mid-1930s island-wide unemployment levels in the formal

economy oscillated between 55% and 60% of the population of working age (ibid., 27).

Like the strike activity of 1915-1921, the social conflicts of the 1920s-1930s were also part of a wider social unrest associated with material life, stretching into the Second World War. This began with what U.S. media and colonial officials called the "children of famine" accompanying the ranks of beggars, petty-thieves, and traffickers in bootleg rum and adulterated milk "plaguing" rural towns and large cities, overlapping with the late-1920s violent strikes in the tobacco-manufacturing sector (Clark 1930, 465, 565; Roosevelt, Jr. 1930, 73; Clark 1975, 125; Picó 1983, 51-52, 121). That colossal groundswell and uncertainty dramatically exploded in the 1930s with what one white-*criollo* intellectual a decade later called the "Age of Criminal Saturation" (Meléndez Muñoz 1963 [1948], 814). Not only did local rates of property crime and social violence break all previous records, but this was when social reformers "discovered" "packs" or "herds" of runaway children wandering the streets embroiled in illegal subsistence activities (Picó 1983, 82.).

The strike wave of 1933-1934 was one of the high marks of mass discontent. Between July and December of 1933 protests proliferated against the rising cost of living, especially the high gasoline prices, compelling taxi drivers and other public-transport workers to massively walkout. That work stoppage was accompanied by striking workers in tobacco factories, needlework manufacture, bakeries, and dockyards, as well as in the sugarcane fields examined shortly. Strike activity in general rose from 10 strikes in 1931-1932 to 18 strikes in 1933-1934, the number of workers involved increasing eleven fold during this period (Gayer, et al. 1938, 223; PRDL 1937, 62-63). More than in 1915-1921, "These strikes were directed not only against employers but also against the government for failing to do anything to alleviate unemployment and suffering" (Dietz 1986, 163). To a large extent, much of the dissatisfaction was likewise directed at the once militant labor federation (the FLT) that, along with the *Partido Socialista* leadership, had sold out to the colonial government and U.S. corporate interests in exchange for joining the majority coalition in the colonial legislature (Galvin 1976, 25-26; Silvestrini 1979; TFP 1982; Dietz 1986, 163-165). The panic was quite tangible among the propertied elites (*criollo* and colonizer): a December-1933 committee of local "respectable" citizens sent a telegram to the Bureau of Insular Affairs in Washington, D.C., indicating among other things that

> All towns in Puerto Rico isolated from each other except by telephone and

> telegraph. Roving mobs composed of the worst elements prevent movement of private and public cars on streets destroying property. Towns [in] state of siege. Citizens unable to leave homes. ...Business paralyzed. Police impotent to protect citizens in life, property, and lawful pursuits. A state of anarchy exists (quoted in Silvestrini 1980, 75)

The climax of this upheaval was the 1933-1934 general strike in the sugarcane sector, beginning with deadly clashes of September 26, 1933 between plantation workers in one of the U.S. Sugar Trust's affiliates (the Puerto Rico Sugar Company) versus the police. By December 6 of that year, workers at the Coloso sugar mill walked out demanding higher wages followed by the workers at the largest sugar mill on that island, the Guánica Central (then the world's second largest sugar mill), generating strike actions perilously close to harvest season. Key *Socialista* government bureaucrats and FLT leaders (under the aegis of the colonialist and pro-management American Federation of Labor) quickly intervened, reaching a compromise with corporate executives—but without consulting the strikers—, substantially cutting these laborers' wages and continuing the twelve-hour shifts in the sugar mill (Silvestrini 1979, 66-72). On January 6, 1934 the irate workers walked out again, opposing both the corporation and the FLT union bosses: initially in the Aguirre sugar mill in the southern district of Guayama and followed by workers at the Guánica Central, the general strike spread across the entire island (including both sugar mill operators and cane-cutters), and soon joined by trade-unionists grouping railroad workers, machinists, carpenters, and stevedores. As in earlier labor conflicts in the sugar sector, many canefields were torched throughout Puerto Rico, while strikers at the Guánica sugar mill destroyed a number of buildings. The colonial government responded by reinforcing the local constabulary with a corps of "special guards" whose combined forces were ruthlessly deployed all over the general-strike zone. Echoing the 1915-1921 tactics of the colonial police, the colonial governor's cabinet began discussing the mobilization of local U.S. National Guard units (TFP 1982, 79-80, 82-85, 98-100, 106).

The strikers in Guayama organized a short-lived trade-union of their own to replace the FLT local and asked the revolutionary leader Pedro Albizu Campos and his anti-imperialist *Nacionalistas* to guide the strike movement. Albizu Campos accepted,

traversing all Puerto Rico, marshalling sociopolitical and economic support for the strikers, as well as publishing a series of pro-strike newspaper articles. But eventually the corporation was able to wait out and starve the strikers with the help of the pro-corporate colonial administration and its constabulary, so that by mid-January to late-February most of the sugar mills workers were forced back on the job (Dietz 1986, 167). However and at its height, this labor unrest in the sugar fields encompassed 29 of the island's 41 sugar mills and plantations, with other labor unions lending support and delaying that year's sugar harvest (TFP 1982, 12, 14, 19, 123, 134, 139, 183).

Those labor mobilizations were followed by the monumental dockyard strike of 1938 (Silvestrini 1979, 55-72; Silvestrini 1980, 74-80; Quintero Rivera and García 1982, 106-113, 118-120). The more than a month-long 1938 strike paralyzed this island's principal waterfronts and was described in the following manner by the colonial labor bureau:

> The history of industrial relations in Puerto Rico has not recorded a strike conflict of comparable social and economic importance as this one in the dockyards. No other preceding industrial struggle, including the great strikes recorded in the sugar industry which at times involved more than one-hundred thousand men, had ever affected our economy more seriously (PRLN/ BdT 1938, 14).

The gravity of this statement stems from the fact that the local economy of this island was fundamentally dependent on the export-import commerce with the U.S. colonial metropole, which the dockyard strike brought to a grinding halt. This was not an exclusively stevedore strike but also involved other dockyard employees: office workers, clean-up and maintenance crews, security personnel, et al., numbering about 95,000 in total (Quintero Rivera and García 1982, 118; TFP 1982, 193). More significantly, this strike marked a turning point in labor solidarities between Puerto Rico's new independent labor movement (partly under the influence of the island's small Communist Party) and progressive trade-unions in the United States. The U.S.-based National Maritime Union's members refused to provide steam-power to operate loading cranes in Puerto Rico's waterfronts and the U.S. Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO) sent organizers and funds to the island to

support the local strike effort, with major gains for the dockyard workers (TFP 1982, 70-78, 190-193).

Between the two world wars and outside Central America and the Antilles, similar labor conflicts, anti-imperialist, and/or political-reform movements sprung up in Mexico, Brazil, Iran, Iraq, Syria-Lebanon, Colombia, and Venezuela (Silver and Slater 1999, 194-200). But comparable upturns of mass labor discontent likewise broke out within core capitalist metropoles, such as Spain, Germany, Italy, and Austria (Silver 2003, 47, 82, 125-128), as well as in England and United States (Tabili 1994, 84, 97-99; Nelson 2001, 26-43, 193-196). Yet some of the most significant mass struggles between the two world wars were organized by populations under direct-colonial domination worldwide: e.g., in India, Vietnam, the Philippines, the French Maghreb, Egypt, the French Congo, the Belgian Congo, South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, and Madagascar (Betts 1985, 173-174; Silver 2003, 90, 128).

It is in this sense that the late-1920s to late-1930s struggles of Puerto Rico's urban and rural laboring populations were part of a worldwide anti-systemic upsurge, in turn incorporating other Caribbean Basin colonies and neo-colonies of the United States and of Europe. That regional conflict asymmetrically coincided with militant trade-unionism, nationalist activism, anti-imperialist rebellions, Garveyism, and Rastafari agitation. By the early 1930s analogous social convulsions surfaced in St. Kitts, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Guyana, Barbados, Jamaica, Dutch Guyana, and Trinidad (Bolland 2001, 212-378). Related anti-imperialist insurgencies also developed during this period across that Caribbean Basin subordinated to U.S. interventionism and military occupation, the most prominent examples being Sandino's guerrilla army in Nicaragua, as well as the student-labor mobilizations and revolutionary uprisings in Cuba and Farabundo Martí's insurrection in El Salvador (Langley 2002, 111-220).

Within overseas colonial and neo-colonial settings, leading sectors within core countries and their client-states addressed the long-term phase of worldwide economic decline and the increasing rivalry between world powers jostling over global hegemony (Arrighi 1994, 63-71, 271-277) with two combined responses. The emergent and still secondary modes of social regulation were partly a reaction to the shortcomings of the dominant positivist-Social-Darwinist/ eugenics regime. In the *longue durée*, those

disciplinary apparatuses tried to improve on the existing mechanisms for controlling and redirecting subaltern resistances. But these two sets of responses at the same time also encompassed (albeit, unevenly) key aspects of the new Keynesian frameworks that would coalesce into a new global regime in the aftermath of the Second World War.

On the one hand, the brutal [racialized] repression corroborated persistent coercion as a definitive and continuing feature. Such measures included the already mentioned 1915-1921 police brutality and "anti-bandit" military campaigns in the Caribbean colonies and neo-colonies of the United States and Great Britain. But there was also the massacre in Amristar, India, perpetrated by British troops against non-violent protesters and pilgrims (Draper 1981), as well as the 1917-1921 anti-Black pogroms in the United States: targeting trade-unionists among others and enabled by governmental acquiescence and local police participation (Shapiro 1988, 115-118, 145-157, 181-184). Shortly afterwards the French government practically levelled Damascus in 1925 with a 48-hour aerial bombardment in an attempt to crush the 1925-1927 Syrio-Lebanese Druze rebellion (Rabbath 1982), while similar airborne campaigns were also inflicted on the Nicaraguan countryside as U.S. planes strafed and dropped fragmentation bombs killing scores of rural laborers and anti-imperialist rebels in 1926-1927 (Megee 1965). Anglo-North American dependencies in the Antilles likewise experienced their share of atrocities in the 1930s: In 1937 the colonial constabulary in Puerto Rico gunned down dozens of unarmed *Nacionalista* demonstrators in the island's second-largest city, Ponce; while that same year the neo-colonial Trujillo dictatorship committed an even greater atrocity massacring thousands of Haitians in the Dominican Republic (Pérez Marchand 1972; García 1983).

But certain leading sectors within core states (e.g., the UK and France) and their colonial and neo-colonial annexes also experimented with new, Keynesian ancillary methods for dealing with those labor conflicts and wider social unrest, in the wake of a collapsed British global hegemony and the long-term decline in the world-economy. "Native" legislative authority, import-tariff reforms, and local industrialization programs were introduced in a limited fashion in British India during 1919-1935. In turn, Paris abolished the arbitrary *code de l'indigénat* in Algeria in 1928, followed by the extension of certain Blum reforms to other French colonies in Africa and Asia in the mid-1930s. And by the late-1930s a British Royal Commission's inquiries led to Representative Government

Associations throughout the Lesser Antilles at the end of the Second World War. By that time the Fabian-inspired transition in many of Britain's African colonies had combined with the 1940 Colonial Development and Welfare Act and the creation in 1945 of the Colonial Development Corporation to raise "native" levels of education and improve local agricultural production (Tomlinson 1979; Betts 1985, 72-73; Aldrich 1996, 118-119, 214; Bush 1999, 263-265). In a similar vein, the New Deal's judicial reorganization paved the way for legal desegregation in the United States after the Second World War (Alexander 1945).

From the late-1920s to 1940s, U.S. neo-colonies underwent similar economic and administrative renovations to overcome the social crises embodied by the widespread social disorder and labor protests over generalized unemployment and the looming contractions in mass incomes: e.g., import-substitution programs, social reforms, and related populist socio-economic measures in Mexico, Ecuador, Brazil, and Argentina (Germani 1973). Projects epitomizing a shift in the social regulation of laboring populations also encompassed other national-Keynesian experiments of the 1930s (rapid industrialization and state-based social compensations) but now in core states and semi-peripheral countries, such as the U.S. New Deal, the Soviet Five-Year Plans, the Blum reforms in France, the German Third Reich, and Italian fascism (Polanyi 1957, 23, 29, 244; Silver and Slater 1999, 197).

Similar socioeconomic and juridico-political reforms were instituted as well in Puerto Rico between 1917 and 1948. Precisely in the midst of the social turmoil of 1915-1921 and partly conceding the FLT-PS demand for greater electoral representation, the U.S. Congress broadened the island's legislative body after 1917: for the first time upper-house posts were chosen through adult-male suffrage (Clark 1975, 3-30). And, similar to France and England, the U.S. government also partially extended specific features of its Keynesian social experiments to Puerto Rico from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s. The upshot entailed unevenly raising the consumption capacities of that island's destitute majorities, revitalizing local industrial output, while neutralizing the elevated levels of social strife and labor resistance. It began with the Puerto Rico Emergency Relief Administration (PRERA), created in August of 1933 to administer the Federal Emergency Relief Agency's programs in this island. Proving ineffective (budget-wise and socio-politically), such measures

expanded to encompass the *Plan Chardón*, (drawn up in June of 1934) and the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (PRRA) in 1935. All this entailed inserting the island within federal minimum-wage legislation, establishing a workers' compensation agency, and at last instituting the eight-hour workday. In 1941-1945 these measures multiplied further with a modest land reform and the creation of state-owned light industries partly aimed at limited import substitution (PRDL 1937, 22, 25-26; Perloff 1950, 37-39, 60, 83-84, 136-147; Lewis 1963, 124-187).

The timing of the *Plan Chardón*, the PRRA, and the subsequent 1941-1945 transformations was hardly fortuitous. James Dietz (1986, 167) has noted that "the colonial administration and the powerful economic interests on the island recognized how much of a threat the [1934 sugarcane] strike had been to U.S. economic and political domination, and they feared what would happen if such a threat emerged again under different leadership." That possibility had to be averted with the two-pronged strategy described above. One was the increase in state repression against the labor movement and especially targeting the anti-imperialist organizations. Yet, as Dietz argues (ibid.), the other prong of this strategy involved "an effort to improve conditions, initially through implementation of the Chardón Plan and then, when that collapsed, through creation of the PRRA. The plans for these measures began to be made early in 1934, not long after the sugar strikes." Within the long-term context of the 1915-1939 labor protests and wider social unruliness, the post-1934 more militant labor mobilizations in Puerto Rico (including the broader and better organized links of solidarity they entailed) only confirmed "how much of a threat" such protests and social unrest represented "to U.S. economic and political domination," especially given that the latter mass demonstrations "emerged again under different [i.e., more radical] leadership." My point here is that such government counter-measures were only a local example of the worldwide, long-term shifts taking place in how global capital and imperial metropoles were responding to the tempestuous labor revolts and social disruptions cutting through the interwar period, above all in the colonies and neo-colonies.

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